

HENRY HUTTLESTON ROGERS  
(1840 - 1909)



An evaluation on the 150<sup>TH</sup> Anniversary  
of his Birth

by EARL J. DIAS

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FAIRHAVEN HISTORICAL SERIES

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Few men in the history of this nation have left so indelible a mark or exerted so enduring an influence on their native communities as Henry Huttleston Rogers.

In fact, the attractive center of Fairhaven, reaching as far north as Huttleston Avenue and Fairhaven High School, owes its charm and beauty both to Rogers' foresight and his generosity.

Rogers once remarked to his good friend, Mark Twain, "My rule in business is to get the money in hand." It is a dictum to which he adhered throughout his glittering financial career — as vice-president and chief trouble shooter of the Standard Oil Company and as an executive officer of numerous copper, steel, coal, gas, and insurance companies, and several railroads.

Living in the frenetic age of those free-wheeling, grasping financiers whom historians have dubbed "The Robber Barons," Rogers was a willing and practicing member of that wealthy and notorious group. Yet, like many of them — Andrew Carnegie and Charles H. Pratt, for example — he had a penchant for funding worthwhile philanthropies.

Critics of Rogers and his fellow capitalists often assert, and perhaps rightly, that the enormous fortunes they amassed could not help but be somewhat tainted.

For these critics, Mark Twain undoubtedly fashioned the wittiest retort. While strolling down Union Street in New Bedford one day, Twain was accosted by a Whaling City dowager.

"Mr. Clemens," she began earnestly, "how can you be so friendly with a man like Mr. Rogers, whose money is tainted?"

"Right, madam," Clemens responded at once. "Taint yours and 'taint mine."

Whether or not Rogers' fortune was tarnished is a moot question. Common sense tells us that to accumulate an estate of about half a billion dollars, judging by modern standards, involved, in all probability, some financial sleight of hand, some questionable maneuverings, and some degree of ruthlessness.

There is ample evidence that on the witness stand in numerous cases during which he was the spokesman for Standard Oil when the company was accused of monopolistic shenanigans, he could be arrogant, snide, often insulting. In contrast, however,

could, on the same witness stand, frequently ooze geniality, could come up with witty observations, could exert an engaging appeal.

His Wall Street enemies often referred to him as "Hell-Hound Rogers." And in his dogmatic book about the Robber Barons, *Frenzied Finance*, Thomas W. Lawson is less than complimentary about Rogers, calling him "relentless, ravenous, ruthless as a shark, knowing no law of God or man in the execution of his purposes."

But Lawson, willing to give the devil his due, also noted, "Away from the spirit of dollar-making, this remarkable man is one of the most charming and lovable human beings I have ever encountered; a man whom any man or woman would be proud to have for a brother; a man who any father or mother would give thanks for as a son; a man whom any woman would be happy to know as a husband, and a man whom any boy or girl would rejoice to call father."

Moreover, in her history of the Standard Oil Company, Ida Tarbell, one of the most vociferous foes of the grasping capitalists of her day, spoke admiringly of "Rogers' charm" and noted further, "He was a pirate of Wall Street, but he alone had the courage to fly his own black flag."

What emerges from the opinions of friends and foes alike is that Rogers was a complex man. First of all, he was lucky in his physical appearance. Judging by photographs of him as a youth, he was, at seventeen, well above medium height, slim, lithe, dark-haired. In one of these photographs, obviously made in winter, he is dressed in a stylish greatcoat and a fur hat that looks Russian in style. His eyes are dark and piercing, his mouth strong and sensual. His hair is long but well-barbered and not shaggy.

In his later years, Rogers was described by a reporter from the Boston Herald as "a tall, slim man, with snow-white hair, rather sparse, and a snow-white, drooping mustache. His military bearing and firm, sharp voice give the impression that he is nearer to forty than sixty-five."

In short, he boasted a commanding presence that could dominate almost every scene of which he was a part.

Although many of his contemporaries were hostile to him, he neverthe-



less, had a considerable talent for making warm friends. If a man may be judged by the company he keeps, then Rogers passes such an evaluation with flying colors. Mark Twain, for example, was ecstatic about the strength of Rogers' friendship, calling him "one of the best friends I have ever had and the nearest perfect, as man and gentleman, I have yet met among my race."

The famous writer had reason to be grateful to Rogers, for at a time when Twain's business affairs were muddled and he was on the verge of bankruptcy, it was Rogers who untangled his snarled finances and set him on the path to solvency.

Rogers could boast of other admiring companions. The distinguished black educator, Booker T. Washington, who founded many schools in the South, was a frequent visitor to Rogers' 85-room mansion in Fairhaven. Rogers was generous in his financial contributions to Washington's invaluable work.

Helen Keller, that remarkable woman who, although deaf, dumb, and blind, made a name for herself as writer and humanitarian, was another of Rogers' closest friends. In May, 1896, at the home in New York of editor-essayist Laurence Hutton, Rogers and Mark Twain first saw Ms. Keller, who was then fourteen. She had profited under the tutelage of her gifted teacher-companion, Ann Sullivan, and when she was sixteen, passed with distinction the entrance examination to Radcliffe College.

In a letter to Mrs. Rogers, Twain praised "this marvelous child" and hoped that Helen would not be forced to retire from her studies because of poverty. He urged Mrs. Rogers to speak to Rogers himself, to remind him of their first sight of Ms. Keller at Hutton's home and to speak also "to the other Standard Oil chiefs" to see what could be done for the meritorious Ms. Keller.

Rogers was generously responsive. In fact, he financed Ms. Keller's education at Radcliffe and even provided her, for many years after, with a monthly stipend.

That she was grateful is obvious in the dedication of her book, *The World I Live In*, which reads, "To Henry H. Rogers, my Dear Friend of Many Years." On the fly leaf of Rogers' own copy of the book, she wrote, "To Mr. Rogers — the best of the world I live

in is the kindness of friends like you and Mrs. Rogers."

Other famous friends of Rogers included William Rockefeller, writers William Dean Howells and George Ade, and Dr. Clarence Rice. The latter, a New York physician, was the type of man who had much appeal for Rogers. He was a distinguished eye, ear, nose, and throat specialist and the official physician of the Metropolitan Opera Company. Among his patients, he numbered tenor Enrico Caruso, actors E. H. Sothern and Edwin Booth, and actresses Julia Marlowe and Lillian Russell.

Naturally, Rogers, who regarded him as his personal physician, admired his expertise in his profession, but he was also attracted to Dr. Rice's ability as a poker player, his penchant for telling tall and amusing stories, his love for the theater.

Rogers, Dr. Rice, and Mark Twain were a lively trio, spending much time together, particularly on cruises in Rogers' fabulous yacht, the Kanawha.

Nor did Rogers neglect his home-town friends in Fairhaven. And it is noteworthy that some of his Fairhaven friendships bore valuable fruit for the community.

High on the list of Rogers' favorites was the genial, sometimes profane George H. Taber, who had, since Rogers' boyhood, been an intimate friend of the family and had also served as Rogers' Sunday school teacher.

Taber had experienced a peripatetic career as a seaman and, eventually, as a captain in the maritime service and of whaling ships. In 1842, he retired from the nautical life, and between 1851-1887 served the town on the board of selectmen, as an assessor, as overseer of the poor, and, for many years, as president of the Fairhaven Savings Bank.

Rogers' fondness for him is amply illustrated by Rogers' presenting to the local Masonic chapter a building named the George H. Taber Lodge on the corner of Main and Center Streets. At the dedication ceremony, Rogers lauded Taber as "the finest old fellow I have ever known.



His heart is as big as an ox, and he has love enough for all the world. He has been a father to me, a father to my mother, the most precious thing on earth."

Another of Rogers' Fairhaven friends, Thomas A. Tripp, was given

by Rogers an important role in furthering the welfare of the community. Early in 1904, Rogers communicated to Tripp his earnest desire to present to the town a new high school.

At the time, Tripp was chairman of the school committee and president of the Fairhaven Institution for Savings.

Because Rogers was planning a European tour, he commissioned Tripp to investigate other secondary schools, to draw up a set of recommendations, and to spare no expense in planning for Fairhaven the best high school that plenty of cash and careful preparation could erect.

Tripp accomplished his appointed duty admirably. The result, one of the academic showplaces of the nation when it was completed in 1906, is a tribute to Rogers' generosity and to Tripp's talent as a forceful catalyst.

A Fairhaven friend once remarked to me, "Henry H. Rogers must have been a genius. How else could he have outwitted and out-guessed some of the best financial brains of his day?"

Genius is perhaps too strong a word. Certainly, Rogers was a shrewd handler of dollars and cents, faithful to his belief that money breeds more money. But aside from his flair for commerce, what were his other salient traits of character?

To begin with, one of his most engaging characteristics was his sense of humor, a quality seen especially in his relationship with Mark Twain. In the correspondence between the two men, there are pleasant examples of Rogers' sense of fun.

For example, there was a standing joke between them that Twain was inclined to pilfer items from the Rogers household whenever he spent the night there as a guest. As an illustration, note a letter written by Rogers to Twain on October 31, 1906. This Rogers letter was occasioned by a letter sent to Mrs. Rogers by Twain in which he notes that while packing his things after a visit, he found that he had put in "some articles that was Laying about... Two books, Mr. Rogers' brown slippers, and a ham. I thought it was one of ourn. It looked like one we used to have, but it shan't occur again, and don't you worry. He will temper the wind to the shorn lamb, and I will send some of the things back if there

is some that won't keep. Yores in Jeus, S.L.C."

Rogers' letter of October 31, 1906 reads as follows: "Before I forget it, let me remind you that I shall want the trunk and the things you took away from my house as soon as possible. I learn that instead of taking old things, you took my best. Mrs. Rogers is at the White Mountains. I am going to Fairhaven this afternoon. I hope you will not be there. By the way, I have been using a pair of your gloves in the Mountains, and they don't seem to be much of an attraction."

This letter, aside from its humor, also demonstrates that somewhere along the line — probably in his days at Fairhaven High School — Rogers learned how to write clearly and directly. In fact, clarity and conciseness are the hallmarks of most of his letters.

Rogers, of course, was not an intellectual. He enjoyed the theater — especially minstrel shows and pratfall comedians — and often attended the opera, but he confesses that at the latter he customarily utilized the occasion for a brief but restful nap.

Practicality, and not poetry, was the keystone of his philosophy of life.

Surprisingly, however, there was a sentimental side to Rogers' personality, and this sentiment most often revealed itself in his genuine love for Fairhaven and for the milieu in which he had grown up.

After all, in his youthful years, he had worked as delivery boy for a Fairhaven market, as a brakeman and clerk for the Old Colony Railroad before he left to seek his fortune in the oil fields of Pennsylvania.

When he spoke at the dedication of the Rogers Grammar School, his first gift to the town, on September 3, 1885, he referred to Fairhaven as "the dear old town which for two hundred years has been the home of a continuous line of some of my ancestors."

And his reasons for erecting some of the Fairhaven buildings which so beautified the community were, for the most part of a sentimental nature.

For example, the handsome Millicent Library was built as a fitting memorial to Rogers' daughter, Millicent, who died when she was only seventeen of a heart ailment. Rogers was heavily stricken by her death and began almost at once to make plans for an appro-



priate tribute to her. Because she had been an avid reader, especially of poetry, Rogers decided that a library named for her and given in the names of her sisters and brother would be a lasting reminder of his love for her.

In the Library, just to the left of the main entrance, is a stunning stained-glass window made by Clayton and Bell of London. In the central panel is the figure of Erato, the Muse of Poetry, and her features bear a striking resemblance to those of the girl to whose memory the library was erected.

The same sentimental approach is obvious in Rogers' building of the Unitarian Memorial Church, an edifice erected to honor the memory of his mother. For example, the granite of which the walls are constructed was taken from a huge ledge on Rogers' Fairhaven estate — a ledge which was called "Love Rock" by the townspeople and a site which was a favorite playground for local children.

When the cornerstone of the Church was laid on August 5, 1901, Mark Twain represented Rogers at the ceremony because the latter was away on one of his frequent business trips. As usual, Twain provided a note of humor to the formal proceedings, assuring the gathering that if they wanted more buildings for the town, "I am empowered to grant your wishes."

The Church itself, which is 15th Century English Perpendicular Gothic in style, is really a miniature cathedral. Long a tourist attraction, the building boasts all its woodwork of the interior of rare English bog oak, floors of marble, and ornate carvings for the pulpit, organ front, chancel screen, and pews.

To supplement the Church, Rogers also contributed an exquisitely furnished parish house with a parlor, an auditorium, a dining room, and two kitchens. On the walls and windows are inscriptions selected by Dr. Robert Collyer. Rogers' closest clergyman friend, from the writings of Collyer's favorite poets.

Finally, what was originally the parsonage is now used as a school, library, and office. In style, it is basically an Elizabethan cottage, with the first story of local granite and limestone, the second of open timber Tudor construction with plaster panels.

The Fairhaven Town Hall, another of Rogers' gifts to the community, was donated in the name of his first wife, Abbie. Unfortunately, Abbie

died only a few months after the dedication of the building.

At the dedication, the seemingly ubiquitous Mark Twain was on hand to deliver the major speech, the manuscript of which hangs in the periodical room of the Millicent Library. In the speech, Twain congratulated Rogers and Abbie for arranging so generous a gift while they were still alive.

He regarded the building as "an example and a suggestion to any who are moved by love of their fellow men to make gifts to them of hospitals, or town halls, or libraries, to build them while they are still alive, not wait till they are dead."

And he continued, "If you build while you are alive, it is really done and well done; but if you wait till you are dead, there is but a barren result and a divided profit — you get credit for the intention, and the lawyers get the money."

Rogers benefactions to Fairhaven did not comprise only public buildings. There is, for example, The Tabitha Inn, completed in 1906 and named for Rogers' great grandmother on the maternal side.

A story, which sounds plausible, asserts that it was Mark Twain who suggested that Rogers erect a hostelry in the community. Twain is supposed to have remarked that the buildings Rogers already had erected were proving to be great tourist attractions; consequently, it would be convenient and pleasant for these tourists to be able to stay, during their visits, in a well-appointed, inviting stopping place.

It should be noted that, unlike the public buildings, the Tabitha Inn was not a gift to Fairhaven. In fact, in February, 1906, Rogers leased the new Tabitha Inn to Mrs. Catherine M. Price of Cambridge.

The Inn was a commercial success, with a lucrative business. In 1929, however, it became the property of the Zeiterion Realty Corporation, with the owners continuing to operate it as an inn and as an attractive place for dining. From 1942-1944, the inn was used as quarters for Coast Guard trainees.

Then, in 1944, the property was purchased by the Fall River Roman Catholic Diocese and became Our Lady's Haven, a retirement and rest home for the elderly.

Rogers' vast fortune benefited not only his home town but surrounding



communities as well. For example, the first of his generous contributions to St. Luke's Hospital in New Bedford was made in 1901 during a typhoid fever epidemic which strained the hospital's facilities. Rogers donated \$40,000 for a new ward for private patients. The ward was constructed of red brick with end porches, and to it, Rogers also contributed \$1,000 for beds and \$4,000 to help defray other expenses.

In addition, in 1903 he erected the White Home on the St. Luke's grounds, named in honor of his Fairhaven friend, Dr. Charles Warren White. The White Home provided space, privacy, and good accommodations for the young women training as nurses at the hospital. From its inception until about 1970, more than 1700 nurses occupied the building.

In the early 1970's, St. Luke's discontinued its nurse training program, and the White Home is now used for business, continuing education, and special projects.

In New Bedford, Rogers also purchased the Bank of Commerce Building in September, 1906, and anonymously turned it over to the Old Dartmouth Historical Society. The building was the pivotal one in what is now the attractive Whaling Museum complex.

Some time in 1895, Rogers and his wife attended the dedication ceremonies at the new Mattapoisett Town Hall. On that occasion, a leading citizen of the town told him that the Town Hall was "a satisfaction," but that what the community really needed was a new school.

On the drive back to Fairhaven, Rogers remarked to his wife, "I've a mind to build a school for Mattapoisett." And he did. At the dedication, again proving he was a man of sentiment, he noted, "The beginning of my education, the alphabet, was learned in Fairhaven, but before I was six years old, my parents came to Mattapoisett, and I attended my first school at Eagle Hall. Later I attended the Little schoolhouse on Church Street." He then went on to assure the audience of prospective pupils, "The main pleasure of this life is found in work."

Rogers was not merely spouting spur-of-the-moment words. There is no question that he was a confirmed workaholic — a man who drove himself, who was constantly on the go.

This may be an admirable philosophy of life for a man raised to revere the Protestant ethic that one must

labor diligently and determinedly to make a laudable place for himself in the world. However, this diligence and determination took an inevitable toll on Rogers' health.

He was a man who had fingers in so many financial pies that difficulties were bound to crop up. In the spring of 1905, for example, trouble loomed on the horizon for him in Kansas, where he owned oil companies and refineries. The Kansas legislature had approved an appropriation of \$40,000 for the construction of a state-owned, independent refinery in Peru, a small town in the state.

Rogers, always a disciple of the free enterprise system, was outraged, voicing vehement opposition to government participation in the oil industry. He testified before the appropriate committees, even though he already had begun to suffer from asthma, hypertension, and a malady of the heart. It was a grueling process, but, eventually, his cup of joy was filled to overflowing when the Kansas Supreme Court ruled that a state-owned plant would be unconstitutional.

However, the most time-consuming and most demanding factor in Rogers' life at this time was his Virginian Railway, which he wanted to construct in order to ship coal deposits from Deepwater to Norfolk, Virginia. Considerable conflict ensued with the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad. But on October 13, 1904, the Tide-water Railroad was granted a charter by Virginia.

The battle for the Virginian displayed Rogers at his most crafty and ingenious. He was able to persuade the citizens of Deepwater and Norfolk that the railroad would be a boon to both communities, and, in fact, it was called by the newspapers "the biggest little railway in the world" and proved both viable and profitable. However, the time and enormous effort he expended on the project continued to undermine his already declining health, not only because of his herculean work but also because of the uncertain economy of the period. And he was forced to pour many of his own assets into the railroad.



After Rogers' triumph in the Virginia Railway enterprise, he returned to New York, continuing to go to his office daily at 26 Broadway. His colleagues, however, were alarmed about his symptoms of fatigue, and the untypical languor of his bearing. Old

John D. Rockefeller, disturbed by the fragility of Rogers' appearance, advised him to cut down on his work. And his second wife, Emilie, urged him to relax.

But he was a man born to die in harness. He had no intention of altering the habits of a lifetime.

Whenever Rogers felt tired or distressed, he often paid a visit to Fairhaven, where he could chat with friends from his boyhood and gain comfort and strength from the familiar sights of the town.

In the middle of May, 1909, he spent a weekend in his beloved community. He made his usual visit to the Atlas Tack Corporation, which he had founded to create a viable industry for his native community. He called on his old friend, Walter P. Winsor at the latter's office in the First National Bank of New Bedford, and also visited with George H. Tripp, the New Bedford Librarian who resided in Fairhaven.

He and Tripp went for an automobile ride to Mattapoisett, Marion, and Wareham. As Tripp later recalled, Rogers noted sadly that nearly all the friends of his youth were gone and that his recent trips to Fairhaven had been pervaded by a sense of loneliness and loss. In Mattapoisett, the two friends stopped for a chat with Henry Purrington, a former schoolmate of Rogers, and Tripp reported that the exchange of reminiscences about school days seemed to revive Rogers' spirits.

In fact, Rogers returned to New York, seemingly refreshed by his short stay in Fairhaven. On May 18, 1909, Rogers, apparently feeling chipper, left his home at 3 East 78th Street, went to his office, and lunched as usual in the Standard Oil Building. In the evening, he visited the homes of his grandchildren.

On the morning of May 19, he rose early but complained to Emilie of a pain in his left arm and a good deal of nausea. At 7 A.M. he lapsed into unconsciousness, and before a physician could arrive, was dead.

When George H. Tripp, who had spent an enjoyable three days with Rogers just the week before in Fairhaven, was informed of his friend's passing, he noted, "The news of his death coming so soon after such an occasion, which he seemed to enjoy so much, was a great shock."

The news of Rogers' death was of enormous interest to the nation's news-

papers. Some of the obituary comments were admiring, others derogatory. The Detroit Free Press, for example, observed, "The growth of his company was marked by ruthless ruin for thousands. It rests on a foundation of special privilege and stolen and extorted rights... On the other hand, the dead king of finance leaves some devoted friends."

The New York Times singled out, "the astonishing career of Mr. Rogers" and declared, "It can never be repeated in this country. The Henry H. Rogers that the business world knew was a man of steel."

It was left to Fairhaven, however, to speak the last word about its most famous native son. On January 12, 1912, a memorial shaft (since removed to the front lawn of Fairhaven High School) was erected in Rogers' honor and placed at the intersection of Main Street and Huttleston Avenue. In accepting the monument on behalf of the town, Selectman Charles P. Maxfield said, "He has left us an act of unselfish devotion in the making and beautifying of his boyhood home."

There are other tributes to Rogers' memory in the town. Annually, on the first Sunday in June, a Rogers Day Memorial Service is celebrated in Unitarian Memorial Church. And on each Memorial Day, students and faculty of Fairhaven High School, as well as grateful townspeople, hold a brief service at the Rogers Mausoleum in Riverside Cemetery. And in the Millicent Library is the beautiful Rogers Room, the meeting place of the Library's trustees. In the room is a reproduction in color of the portrait of Rogers painted by the British artist, J.J. Shannon. There are also portraits of Rogers' mother and grandmother.

The pew that he probably occupied in Unitarian Memorial Church is marked by a small plaque. And in the entrance hall of Fairhaven High School, there is, in a niche in the wall, a small bust of his likeness.

What is the final verdict on Rogers? First of all, he was a child of his times — an era that historian Howard Mumford Jones has dubbed

"The Age of Energy." It was a time during which Americans of vast wealth — the Rockefellers, the Goulds, the Pratts, the Harrimans, the Archbolds — exploited and experimented with ideas, styles, fads, and each other. And, surprisingly, they also made invaluable



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contributions to libraries, schools, universities, charities, and the like. In fact, these rip roaring capitalists were striking examples of the gleeful swashbucking, the innocence and guilt of what Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner called "The Gilded Age."

Perhaps the central truth about Rogers was that he was a role player, a born actor. From his experiences on the Phoenix Hall stage in Fairhaven in his youth, he learned the art of being theatrical in the dramatic situations that cropped up in his life. In the business world he was the "man of steel" — hard, shrewd, ruthless, giving no quarter. In his social life, he was amicable, popular, charismatic, a boon companion, a genial host.

At home, he was an affectionate family man, a faithful husband, a generous father, a doting grandfather. Only occasionally in his domestic life did he display the ruthlessness, the iron determination that he exhibited in the financial world. One such occasion was the framing of his daughter Mae's first husband for adultery — a devious and hard-hearted procedure, indeed. And Rogers even pulled the legal strings, often using devious methods, for the eventual divorce.

In the final analysis, however, Rogers was at heart the Fairhaven boy — hard-working, hard-playing, an understanding and loyal friend, but an implacable enemy. In his youth he had been brash, outspoken, dominating. However, he had

also learned from his gentle and warm-hearted mother, Mary, that a good man should try to be idealistic and altruistic.

Unquestionably, some of this idealism and altruism became tarnished in later years when he encountered the grim realities of the business world, in which to survive required ruthlessness and a great many Machiavellian machinations. He remained the Fairhaven boy in his friendships, in his domestic life. But in the financial world he could be grasping, greedy operating under a flexible code that often stretched the rules of both honesty and fair play.

At his worst, he could be despicable — "as pitiless as a shark" as Thomas Lawson had noted. At his best, he was a man worth knowing — a good friend, a bountiful benefactor, a model of amiability and gregarious socialability.

And no matter what the final verdict of history on his controversial career, he remains for his native town a prince of good fellows, the "Hen" whose spirit and influence still parade the community.

Moreover, his fellow townsmen have an easy and enthusiastic answer to any derogatory criticism about their native son. This answer is best expressed in the words engraved on the handsome monument to him in Fairhaven — "Si monumentum requiris, circumspice" — which freely translated says, "If you would see his work (Or monument) Look about You."

